WHIRRAKEE

May 2005 Vol. 26 No. 4

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MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF THE BENDIGO FIELD NATURALISTS CLUB

Bendigo Field Naturalists Club Inc.
Address for correspondence: PO Box 396, Bendigo 3552
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Membership of the Bendigo Field Naturalists Club is open to all those interested in Natural History. The subscription rates are: Single $34; Family $40; Concession: Single $28.50; Family $34. *Whirrakee* subscription only is $34.

General meetings are held on the second Wednesday of each month. The venue for General meetings is the Golden Square Senior Citizens Building, Old High Street, Golden Square. The invited speaker at general meetings starts at 8:00pm and meetings conclude with supper.
If a workshop is held prior to the meeting, it will be advertised and it usually starts at 7.00pm.
The Annual Meeting is held in September.

Committee meetings are held on the third Wednesday of each month at 7:30pm. Members of the Committee are the Office Bearer listed above and the following members: Rob Moors, Maurie Lewis, Glenise Moors, Rod Orr, Bob Ruddick, and there are 3 vacancies.

Excursions are conducted irregularly and are advertised on the diary page of the *Whirrakee*. The assembly point for excursions is the Golden Square Senior Citizens Building, unless otherwise specified. In addition to local excursions, campouts are held several times each year, usually coinciding with long weekends or holiday periods.

The Bendigo Field Naturalists Club has one active group that meets regularly (the Fauna Study Group) and other groups that meet at irregular intervals.

Fauna Study Group: meets on the fourth Wednesday of the month at 7:30pm in the Golden Square Senior Citizens Building.
Chairman: John Burtonclay, Fadersons Lane, Mandurang (5439 5710)
Secretary: Bill Holsworth, 13 Nabilla Crs., Bendigo (5443 4063)
Equipment Officer: Maurie Lewis (0407 427179)

Bird Observers Group: This group has field excursions and the occasional lecture evening. Please consult the *Whirrakee* for details. Special bird observations should be reported to Anne Bridley 5449 3479.
To propose meetings or excursions please contact Kerrie Norris 5447 8017.

Front cover photo?...see bottom of page 2.

WHIRRAKEE

Monthly Newsletter of the Bendigo Field Naturalist Club

Vol. 26, No.4, May 2005

Whirrakee takes its name from the Whirrakee Wattle (*Acacia williamsonii*) which is virtually endemic to the Bendigo region

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Authors are responsible for the accuracy of the information they use and also for any opinions expressed in their articles.
Contributions will be included as soon as possible after they are received, although articles received more than one week after the monthly General Meeting will probably be too late for inclusion in the next issue of *Whirrakee*.
Articles in *Whirrakee* may be reproduced, but permission should be obtained from the Bendigo Field Naturalists Club, and acknowledgment should be given to the author and the Club. Some back issues are still available on request.

Editor's note
There has been a lot of writing about fire management in the last few issues of this magazine. Generally speaking, the authors of most articles do not favour many aspects of fuel reduction burning as it is practiced at the moment. More dialogue is needed amongst interested parties to protect natural systems that have evolved with a certain fire regime as well as protecting lives and property. The articles in the Whirrakee have been mostly in defence of ecosystems and this is not surprising considering the kind of club we are. However, I am pleased to see an article in this month's edition that takes a slightly different standpoint and is widening the discussion on this topic. Are there any other members out there who can contribute further points of view? Preserving ecosystems and managing fire are, in most cases, not incompatible – but a lot of discussion has to occur about the fine detail of where, when and how much needs to be burned as well as where further residential development should be allowed

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Front Cover Photograph: I am not sure who took this photo but it represents field-natting at its best! The picture shows Maurie Lewis on the fauna group' s March excursion to Torrumburry (see article on page 5). Obviously lots of interesting animals other than sugar gliders were found.

Short Notices

Garden Working Bee
As flagged by Matthew Comer at the last general meeting, we will not need a garden working bee for the month of May. However, working bees are going to resume (as normal) in June.

National Bird Conference in Bendigo

As there will be a national bird conference in Bendigo in late September/early October, it was suggested, at the last general meeting, to publish a special bird edition for September. So please, write up your bird stories and save them till then. They can however be sent any time and I will keep them for the September edition (if you indicate this).

A New Book for Bendigo....
Wildlife of the Box-Ironbark Country
By Chris Tzaros
Published by CSIRO Publishing at an advertised cost of $39.95 plus $9.00 for postage and handling.
This book should be available in late April or May. If you would like to buy this book through the Club, please send a message to Bill Holsworth to find out if there are any discounting arrangements.

For details of content, please see April *Whirrakee*.

Message form Diana Collier – Club Librarian
The club has several complete sets of the *Whirrakee* available. Does anybody have a use for these or know of a place that could use them? If so, please contact Diana (her contact details are on the inside front cover).

For our older members

Editor's comment
I received this letter from Marj Muir at the beginning of April. She and her husband Aub (whose health has much declined) were active club members before they moved away some time ago.
I have reproduced part of the letter here for our long-standing members and I do have the contact address if anybody is interested in writing.

...it is now over 7 years since my husband Aub, and I left Bendigo (Maiden Gully) and our association with the B.F.Nats. Aub and I were interested in the bird life and he spent many, many hours photographing, from which we had much pleasure.

I am still getting much pleasure from the news of the Club's activities in the *Whirrakee*, which arrives monthly. I found Rob Watkins' report in last month's issue (March) very interesting indeed. It is very sad to learn of the dwindling of bird life and destruction of habitats.

Here we have occasional visits from a pair of butcher birds, and more frequently some noisy miners, magpies, pee wees, ravens and peaceful doves.

Please remember us to the older members and thank you for continuing the *Whirrakee* delivery.

To the members of the Bendigo Field Naturalists Club –
In defence of firebreaks

By Keith Graham

I have listened at many BFNC meetings to the debate of the needs or otherwise of fire breaks to protect our native forests and State parks form the ravages of wildfire.

For those who have never experienced the devastation of one or our recurring natural disasters I would be remiss to let this moment pass without passing on the details of an event I was unfortunate enough to have witnessed.

Complacency revealed by some of our speakers is not unique; our community was to some degree guilty of the same offence some 40 years ago. We had been involved with many fires but with better fire trucks and communications we were fairly confident we could contain any fire that occurred.

Sunday 15th January 1965 is indelibly etched into my memory and to all those involved in that dreadful afternoon.

The winter and spring of 1964 had been bountiful with heavy annual growth in both farmland and forest, but by mid-October the rain had petered out and for the next three months no rain of significance fell so by January the countryside was tinder dry. About 1pm on that day a column of smoke rose out of the Kingower Forest, a typical Box-Ironbark Reserve, grey box, red ironbark, yellow gum and the usual understorey of wattles and shrubs. The fires started east of, and adjacent to, the present Kooyoora State Park and at this stage was driven by the stiff NW breeze.

Our party – coming from the east never reached the forest fire as by then it had spotted into grassland and within minutes it was beyond control. With the wind velocity increasing, the fire raced towards Tarnagulla giving the firemen no choice but to save lives and homes. Tarnagulla, an old mining town with a mining gully and pine plantation through its centre, most surely would have been destroyed but for a sudden and violent wind change from the SW.

I would ask my readers to try and visualise a fire, which an hour previously had been ten kilometres away, suddenly appearing on your doorstep, something I hope none of you ever experience.

The fire, with the wind approaching gale force, swept NE through Llanelly, Arnold and Arnold West, with Inglewood and Bridgewater in its path. The fire, which before had a fire front of two kilometres, now had one of some fifteen.

At the moment in time when the wind changed I was looking for some sheep for a neighbour (on foot) in scrubland abutting the Kingower Forest. It was then I saw something I imagined could only occur in Southern Victoria or the Dividing range. The forests fire driven by the gale became a crown fire, which is when the canopy burns ahead of the ground fire and travels at frightening speed.

How was the fire brought under control – **Firebreaks**. The only thing that stood between Inglewood and the wildfire was harvested eucalypts on the mallee ridges – and unintended firebreak, but a sure one nevertheless. The other stroke of good fortune was some 500 acres (200 hectares) of winter fallow that had been prepared for the next years crop and the burnt off railway easement that broke the fire into smaller fronts. The most serious of these ran into a paddock of tomatoes on the Loddon River bank, and backfire on a farmhouse driveway by a local fire brigade stopped it sweeping into the heavily grassed Loddon flats and almost certainly stopped it from jumping the river on its path toward Derby.

And what were the losses – several homes, all the wooden bridges, 100s of livestock, hay sheds, outbuildings and many kilometres of fencing. A fire truck, powered by a petrol motor, vapourised and stalled in front of the fire. The firemen on the back survived but

their faces and hands still bear scars of their burns.

But the most tragic of all was the loss of two lives, one elderly resident who died defending his home and a young father overtaken and killed by the crowning fire in the Kingower Forest after the wind change.

The natural environment did not escape, of course; most of the Kingower Forest, some 1200 hectares, was totally destroyed, particularly the hollow trees that are the most vulnerable to fire, also the Yorkshire Forest at Llanelly and areas of private timbered country; all the trees and understorey lining the creeks and all the roadsides vegetation. Those trees that escaped serious damage were defoliated by the heat of the blaze.

We never realised the background noises that are ever present in the countryside, but after the fire, complete and utter silence, no cicadas, crickets or birds not even the rustle of leaves of the burnt out trees.

To try to explain the magnitude of the fire, I traced the perimeter and transposed it over the Bendigo area. Assuming the fire had started on the Loddon Valley Highway west of Sebastian, it would have travelled SE past Myers Flat, then NE to Huntly and beyond covering most of the Whipstick State Park.

The fauna of the Kingower Forest that managed to escape would have faced a dubious future in other areas but the flora revival was quite different. The Orchard dam area, which I have visited for more than 60 years and it is well known to some of our members, was severely damaged. The recovery of the understorey shrubs and orchids was very rapid so the fear that man-made firebreaks will not recover is misplaced. Those that claim that the Whipstick Park is not fire-prone should visit the Kingower Forest and compare their similarities.

The suggestion that the Whipstick Park has not had a serious fire for 180 years, so is not in danger, is as logical as not insuring your home because it has never burnt down.

What we have to remember, firebreaks that are put in place to protect the lives and property of the many residents that are moving into these areas also protect the forests.

So, what are the options of the BFNC? Firstly accept the fact firebreaks will be burnt with or without our consent or co-operation.

If co-operation is chosen, at least we could have input into when and where the least sensitive areas are to be burnt.

Secondly, I would suggest that any of our able-bodied members join one of the many CFA brigades. All that is expected of you is to do your basic fire drills, be prepared to be called out at any time, and at the worst, risk your life in a vital public service.

A lifetime of experience ha convinced me that fire prevention is our best defence against wildfire,

My conscience does not allow me the luxury of remaining silent for I know the consequences of an uncontrollable fire.

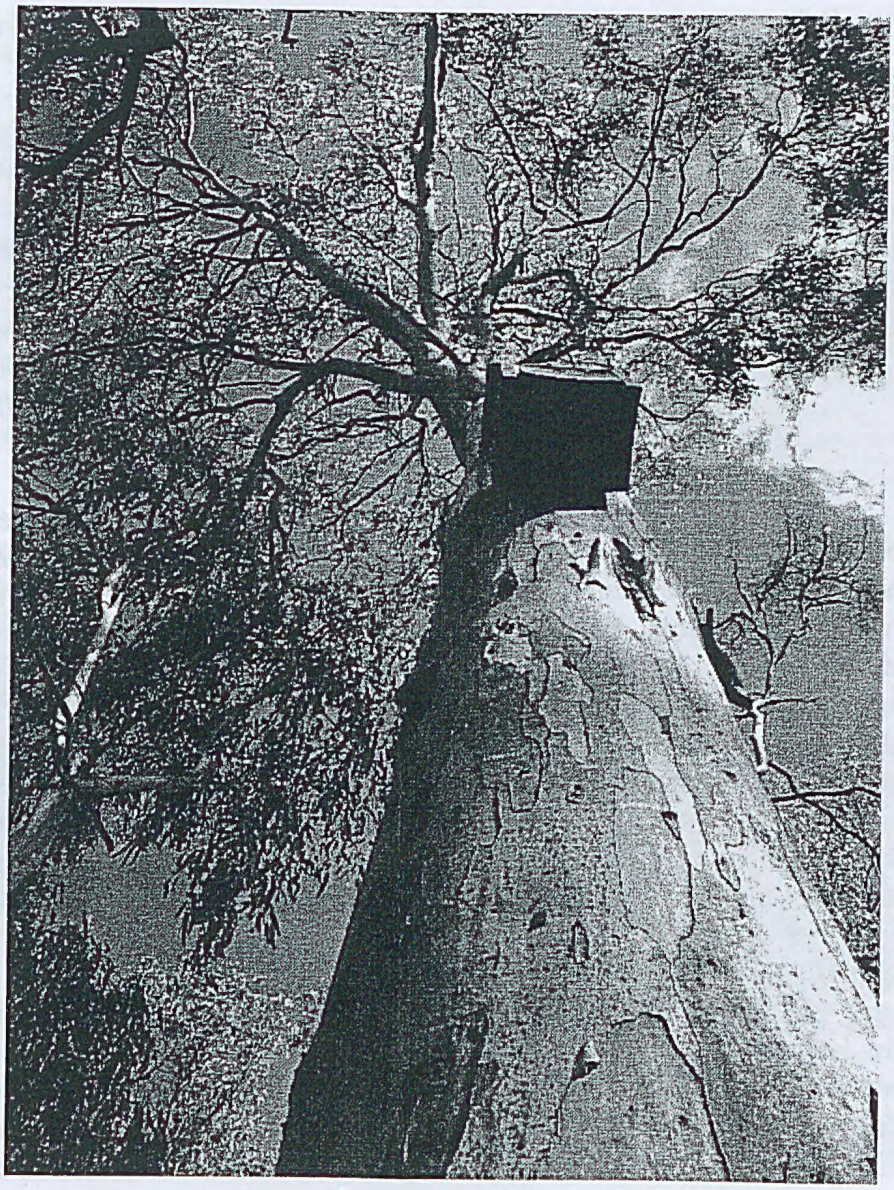
Fauna Study Group Campout – Report by Maurie Lewis

The group had an excellent time at Torrumbarry Weir Lock 18 – 20 March 2005. Eleven persons camped at Black Charlie Bend on the Murray River. We put out nine feeder bottles hoping that they would attract the sugar gliders but none came. Spotlighting sessions with Johnny Robinson were more successful: 30 ringtailed possums, 11 brushtailed possums, and 7 sugar gliders. But the squirrel gliders that had been found there a few years ago were not seen. The 10 nest boxes put up in March 2001 all showed signs of occupation this year; most had or are being used by sugar gliders.

Around the campsite we recorded 37 bird species and most were very tame permitting close viewing. Some of the most interesting birds were: Little friar birds, yellow rosellas, kookaburras, and brown tree creepers. Peaceful doves were often heard calling, and at least three Boobook owls were calling each night from 3am to dawn. A tawny frogmouth came to camp each night to catch moths attracted to camp lights. We tried to get barking owls to respond to tape but got no response. Barking frogs were also heard at night. Johnny R. found a goanna (lying around) on the road!

The group wishes to give special thanks to Johnny for his assistance with the feeder bottles and spotlighting.

Torrumburry March 2005
What might these people be doing?



Sugar Glider Habitat
Torrumburry
March 2005

April General meeting
Speaker: Rolf Schlagloth
Koalas and their management in Victoria

By Sabine Wilkens

The Australian Koala Foundation (AKF) is an international organization whose prime focus is the long-term conservation and effective management of the koala.
Rolf Schlagloth works for AKF as the liaison officer for Victoria. He came to Ballarat with an education in Mathematics and Economics but when he encountered his first koala (dead on the road) he decided to do something to help the wildlife. He did further studies and several higher degree projects which involved koalas and he is presently developing a Koala Plan of Management for the City of Ballarat.

Rolf gave us the take-home messages of his talk at the beginning. Below are some of the important points:
• The biggest problem for koalas is the continued loss and fragmentation of koala habitat on the mainland.
• Large koala numbers in the zoo-like islands and isolated habitats give a false impression of a secure future for the koala.
• Band-aid koala management that treats the symptoms but not the cause are no longer acceptable.
• Every koala island and isolated situation is different.

Koalas nearly became extinct on the mainland in the early 1900 due to hunting for their pelts by white Australians. Small numbers of koalas were taken to several islands though (e.g, French Island) where they soon increased in number due to lack of dispersive opportunity, lack of disease and lack of predators.
Very soon after these island colonisations, it became clear that there were too many koalas for the amount of food available and some effort was made translocating them to the mainland, to get them off the island before they eat the last gum leaf and to recolonise the mainland. Rolf showed some amazing original footage (with sound!) of such a relocation effort (with methods highly disapproved of today from an animal ethics perspective).
Nobody seems to have done any follow-up as to how successful these newly established populations were. They cannot have been self-sustaining (a measure of a successful translocation) as until the 1980s translocations were still continuing to top up ever-dwindling mainland populations.

The few original koalas from French Island have given rise to most of the present day population in Victoria, i.e. all the mainland koalas are genetically very similar. This is not a good basis for a sound population anywhere and has greatly weakened the stock. Once translocated, the animals are facing continued loss and fragmentation of habitat, collision with cars, attacks by dogs and Chlamydia, a sexually-transmitted fungal disease which is rampant on the mainland.

On some islands (e.g. Snake Island), where koalas never occurred naturally anyway, it has been decided to manage the existing koalas to extinction. On other islands (e.g. Raymond Island), the tourism industry is build around the koalas and the inhabitants desperately want them to stay. The government also appears to take the attitude that some koalas should be left on islands as a safety resource. Australia-wide, the koala is worth two billion dollars through the tourism industry.

Having koalas on island is problematic from many points of view. At two years of age, males normally disperse and this is not possible on a small island. Food may run low in drought years and animals cannot move to another food source. Unusual or unhealthy plant material consumed to substitute their normal food plants may cause deteriorating health. Crowding may cause additional stress, which makes koalas susceptible to even small environmental challenges.

In the last few years, some monitoring was done for the translocations from Mt Eccles. It turned out that the mortality rate is 40-90%. This has finally put numbers to a very large waste of resources over the last many

decades and since then the translocations have stopped.

From the Framlinghan Forest , many koalas have been relocated, partly because they were blamed for the bad health of the forest. Very few koalas are left there now but the trees are suffering severely form insect attack. It thus looks as if koalas were not the only factor causing stress for those trees.

How is the AKF going to help kolas in Victoria?
At present, lots of lobbying is underway to protect koala habitat, and the foundation is trying to get the koala listed as 'vulnerable' and 'threatened' under the various federal and State Conservation Acts, so add further more weight is behind lobbying for habitat. Present habitat for koalas s mapped in the National Koala Habitat Atlas, a painstaking process which will take a long time to complete but, when completed, will be able to point the way for town planners, developers and land managers.
One difficulty with keeping up these activities is the lack of funding. The Foundation depends on sponsors, the selling of merchandise, grant monies and the occasional supply form governments.
The foundation also cooperates with scientists (e.g. how good is a blue gum plantation as koala habitat?) and community groups who love to be involved with planting and other koala habitat restoration works.

A healthy and sustainable koala population in Victoria – will this be possible? With the enormous problems facing the koala in Victoria, I was left feeling a bit despondent about its prospects. Hopefully enthusiastic people like Rolf, together with some visionary politicians, will prove me unnecessarily pessimistic and plain wrong.

Ruth Kennan at the fallen Bull Mallee Dec 04 Unity Dam Inglewood. Photographer: F.Watts

Loss of a wonderful old Bull Mallee at Inglewood

By Fred Watts

The bull mallee, *Eucalyptus behriana*, growing at the verge of the Unity Dam at Inglewood had developed a huge lignotuber, probably due to the occasional flooding of the dam during the past hundred years or more when it and other mallees stood in shallow water for some weeks.
The mallee was in good health prior to the DSE controlled burn last October and was most unfortunate to be destroyed in its position at the far verge of the dam. I regret that I do not possess a photo of the tree before the burning.

Bull Mallee Nov 04 Unity Dam Inglewood Photographer: F.Watts

From the Mailbag
Author: Elaine Mathison

Each month the club receives a number of newsletters and magazines: some by subscription and some in exchange for Whirrakee. These are available from the club library.

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THE VICTORIAN NATURALIST(FNCV)
February 2005

"Does size matter? Tree use by translocated Koalas" points out that over-browsing of Manna Gum, and occasionally of Swamp Gum, has occurred in areas where koalas have been introduced. The authors, including Rolf Schlagloth, the speaker at our April meeting, have checked tree use at three release forests in the Ballarat area.

"Some guidelines for the conservation of woodland insects in the Wimmera area" outlines the importance of insects in the ecology and provides some suggestions to support viable populations in remnants of native vegetation. It includes a short list of some of the relevant species.

"Biodiversity and status of butterflies in the Ballarat region" describes the characteristics of the area, and the butterfly species so far known. A variety of sources includes information from naturalists, local publications, the writer's casual observations and some more formal research.

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THE BIRD OBSERVER(BOCA)
April 2005

"Cruising with Kingfishers" describes the pleasures of birdwatching while cruising on the Murray River through the Barmah Wetlands.

"BOCA Tagalong 2004" is an extensive report on visits to many reserves, national parks and swamps in northern New South Wales. Each area is described and the bird highlights given.

"Bush Memories" is a reprint of material from the Bird Observers' Club monthly notes from 1941. It deals with the area around St Arnaud, describing the vegetation and some of the birds to be seen there at that time.

- This issue also contains the BOCA annual reports, including those from associated country groups, and gives details of events planned to celebrate the BOCA centenary this year.

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Also received recently:

Castlemaine Naturalist(CFNC)

Ballarat Naturalist(BFNC)

Geelong Naturalist(GFNC)

Field Nats News(FNCV)

Plains Wanderer(Echuca BOCA)

Natural Heritage(NH Trust)

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Bendigo Field Naturalists Club Inc.

Guest Speaker Syllabus for General Meetings 2005

Second Wednesday of the month, 8:00 pm

Please check each *WHIRRAKEE* for additional events or changes.
The general meeting will start at 7:30pm, with the speaker being introduced at 8:00pm.

Date - 2005	Topic	Speaker
May 11	'Mapping of remnant natural vegetation in NW Victoria'	Alison Oates (Arthur Rylah Institute)
June 8	'Fungi of the Box-Ironbark forests and the Fungimap project'	Tom May (Royal Botanic Gardens, Melbourne)
July 13	'Co-operative breeding behaviour of tree-creepers (with particular reference to the White-browed Tree-creeper)'	Jim Radford (Research Fellow, Deakin University)
August 10	'Pink-tailed Worm-lizard, Hooded Scalyfoot and other rare reptiles'	Peter Robertson (Wildlife Consultant)
September 14 AGM	'Studies of the road edge effect in box and ironbark forest' (watch this spot – speakers and topic may still change)	Zoe Pocock and Ruth Lawrence (La Trobe University)
October 12	'Xanthorrhoea - ecology and flowering'	Mark Bellette (University of Melbourne)
November 9	'Owls of the World'	David Hollands (Wildlife Photographer)
December 14	Christmas Diner. 'The Giant Gippsland Earthworm - conservation issues'	Neville Rosengren (La Trobe University)

Diary

The General, Bird Observers Group and Fauna Study Group meetings are held at the Golden Square Senior Citizens Building, Old High Street, Golden Square, unless otherwise indicated.

General Meetings

Wednesday, May 11 7.30pm
Alison Oates from the Arthur Rylah Institute will be talking about 'Mapping of remnant natural vegetation in NW Victoria'.

Wednesday, June 8 7.30pm
'Fungi of the Box-Ironbark forests and the Fungimap project' will be the evening's topic. The speaker, Tom May is from the Royal Botanic Gardens in Melbourne.

Fauna Group

This group meets (in the clubrooms) on the fourth Wednesday of the month at 7.30pm. The following is a guide for the discussion topics for this year's meetings (subject to change).

May 25th - Termites
Jun 22nd - Koala
Jul 27th - Scat identification

Excursions

Every Friday morning starting at around 9 to 9:30, the Fauna Group inspects nest boxes in the Spring Gully area. The excursions are led by Maurie Lewis, 16 Vains St. Golden Square. Phone 0407 427 179 or 5442 1813. Phone Maurie to confirm exact departure times and location. If you don't phone but go directly to Maurie's house and find nobody at the house between 9 and 9:30 then the excursion is not on.

Garden Working Bee

As flagged by Matthew Comer at the last meeting, we will not need a garden working bee for the month of May. However, working bees are going to resume (as normal) in June.

Wildlife Rescue & Information Network Inc.

W.R.I.N. is an organisation dedicated to the care of orphaned, sick or injured native animals.
It is fully endorsed by the Dept of Natural Resources and Environment.
Please call our Emergency Number for Help for Fauna in Need. Phone: 0419 356433.

Bendigo Field Naturalists on the web

Any comments about the site are most welcome.

http://communitysites.impulse.net.au/bendigofieldnaturalists/fnats.html

125 years FNCV

The members of the Field Naturalists Club of Victoria Inc.are celebrating their 125th year by holding a symposium LEAVES FROM OUR HISTORY on Saturday 28 May and Sunday 29 May at The Mueller Hall, Royal Botanic Garden, Melbourne, Birdwood Ave. South Yarra, 3141. A professionally catered lunch will be served each day as well as morning and afternoon tea. The cost is $130.00 per person for the 2 days or $70.00 for one day. On Saturday evening there will be a Formal Dinner in the Mueller Hall: Cost $75.00.
Registration forms should be received by 20 May 2005 with payment. FNCV Locked Bag 3, Post Office Blackburn, 3130, Phone/Fax 9877 9860

60 years of Portland FNC

Portland Field Naturalists Club Inc. is celebrating its 60th Anniversary and has sent us an invitation to our members to attend their Celebrations (7th May). See page 3 of the April *Whirrakee* for details or contact Ruth Graney on 5529 5335.